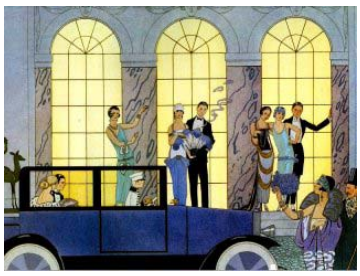

Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

The Jazz Age in Indiana

Hoosier songwriter Hoagy Carmichael once said that the 1920s "came in with a bang of booze, flappers with bare legs, jangled morals and wild weekends." Lasting through the 1920s and 30s, the Jazz Age was a time period of dramatic change in America. By the end of World War I, the Age of Innocence passed from the American consciousness, and the Jazz Age jumpstarted with the banning of alcohol known as Prohibition in early 1920. This new era was a clash of the traditionalists, who romanticized the pre-war era of the Age of Innocence, with its strict moral code, traditional social roles and simpler lifestyle, and the modernists, who looked forward to revolutionary ideas in social thought, marveled at scientific advancements and reveled in the leisure time to take advantage of both.

At the stroke of midnight on Jan. 16, 1920, America went dry. There wasn't a spot in the country, whether public or private, where an American could legally take a drink. Prohibition lasted for 13 years and was a major defining force for the Jazz Age. The idea behind Prohibition was to reduce crime and poverty; unfortunately, this so-called "Noble Experiment" was a colossal failure. People not only continued to drink during Prohibition, but alcohol-related deaths actually began to rise. Mob-controlled liquor created a booming black market economy, and gangster-owned speakeasies replaced neighborhood saloons. Backwater stills, moonshine and bootleggers became prevalent. In New York City, popular stars like Fred and Adele Astaire entertained at The Trocadero, and Duke Ellington led the house band at the Cotton Club.

For all of the work of organizations like the Indiana Anti Saloon League, there were still areas in Indiana that remained "wet." The Calumet region, close to the center of bootlegging in Chicago, never really went dry at all, and the predominantly German-American Dubois County also remained wet. In fact, there was a local moonshine, known as "Dubois County Dew," that gained a wide reputation. Many Legion posts often sold beer without restraint. Likewise, illegal gambling became big business, especially in areas like Orange County where the French Lick Springs Hotel and the West Baden were considered hotspots for vacationers from big cities. From Al Capone to "Diamond Jim" Brady, the famous and infamous alike flocked to the rolling hills of southern Indiana.

In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, and women gained the right to vote. Suffragettes were on the front lines for this battle, but it was the flappers who were easy to spot. In the previous age, it was the genteel "Gibson Girl" who embodied the ultimate style for women. Her hair was long and worn up, and her dress discretely fell to the floor, while a tight corset helped her maintain her feminine silhouette. In contrast, the flapper was practically brazen. She bobbed her hair, and (gasp!) even wore makeup. Her dress was just knee length, and more often than not, her arms were exposed as well. As for corsets – don't even think about it! Flappers hung out in speakeasies and nightclubs where they danced the "Tango" and the biggest dance craze of all, the "Charleston."

At the same time, Indiana Avenue in Indianapolis was hopping to the tunes of some of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. Clubs like the Sunset Terrace hosted performers such as Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller and Count Basie. The area also produced fertile musical ground for local musicians such as Scrapper Blackwell, Leroy Carr, Noble Sissle and Freddie Hubbard. The Madame Walker Building was erected on the avenue in 1927 and included a theater, restaurant and office space for black professionals. Indiana Avenue thrived during Prohibition.

Unfortunately, all was not well within the black community. Segregation was solidified during this time period with the construction of all-black schools, like Crispus Attucks, Lincoln High School and Gary Roosevelt. This was also the era of the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, which first appeared in Evansville in 1920. By 1923, the Klan's evidence was throughout most of the state with large rallies occurring in Hammond, Shelbyville and Kokomo. The Indiana Grand Dragon, D. C. Stephenson, was one of the most powerful men in Indiana, with connections to many high political officials and supervision of KKK affairs in 23 northern states. Stephenson

had contributed large amounts of money to several political campaigns – including that of Indianapolis Mayor John Duvall and Indiana Gov. Ed Jackson.

The Klan appealed to many Hoosiers who felt that these were times of moral decay, and any organization that stood for decency and order should not be shunned. The Klan publicly opposed the violation of prohibition, prostitution, premarital sex and adultery. Ironically, Stephenson, the charming leader of the KKK, had no qualms about violating any of those virtues. He was known to have had wild parties at his Irvington mansion (an Indianapolis neighborhood), complete with good gin and the companionship of several different women. In 1925, Stephenson was arrested and ultimately convicted of the rape and murder of a young woman by the name of Madge Oberholtzer. Believing that his friend Gov. Jackson would pardon him, Stephenson was quoted as saying, "I am the law in Indiana." The pardon never came, and Stephenson was sent to the state prison in Michigan City. Undoubtedly, the sordid details that were revealed in the trial and evidence of other underhanded Klan activities ultimately led to its fall.

The prosperous 1920s led to the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. Bank robbers were becoming distressingly bolder and more successful, such as Indiana's John Dillinger. Sometimes seen as a modern-day Robin Hood, John Dillinger laughed at society and robbed the banks that had foreclosed on the depression-ridden people. He started out as a petty thief, spending nine years in the state prison system. While incarcerated at Michigan City State Penitentiary, Dillinger formed his gang from the personal associations he had made with fellow inmates. Upon his parole in 1933, the Dillinger Gang became the most notorious of many gangs that spread terror through Indiana and the Midwest. In January 1934, Dillinger was captured and placed in the Lake County jail at Crown Point, where he ultimately made a dramatic escape. This landed him on the FBI's most wanted list and the moniker of "Public Enemy Number One." Dillinger's career finally came to a fatal end in July 1934 at the Biograph Theater in Chicago.

In order to combat lawlessness, the Indiana General Assembly expanded the role of the state police in 1933 from that of highway patrol to general statewide law enforcement. Originally organized in 1921, the Indiana State Police's primary responsibility had previously been highway safety. This was due to the increase in automobile traffic that traversed Indiana's roads.

Americans have always had a love affair with their automobiles, and while Hoosiers were initially a little slow to adopt this new form of transportation, they had overcome their fears by 1920. Cars were being purchased in Indiana as rapidly as pocketbooks would allow. At the end of the 1920s, there was one car for every four Hoosiers, and the car culture pervaded the decade. Automobiles were seen as the primary symbol of individual freedom and social progress. And many Hoosiers enjoyed this newfound freedom in Indiana-made automobiles such as Studebaker, Auburn, Cord, Marmon, National, Duesenberg and Stutz, just to name a few.

With the ability to travel farther and faster, Hoosiers explored different ways of using their leisure time. This era saw the advent of radio and movies. Several beautiful large ballrooms, such as the Indiana Roof in Indianapolis, were also built during this time period. In addition, tanning became a new fad. Where as before a tan was a sign of someone who worked outside for a living, now it signified "a trip to the lake or seashore, or a vacation, the expenditure of money and social standing." As a result, resorts like Indiana Beach in Monticello, which opened in 1926, became popular vacation destinations.

Sports were also big in this era. The Indianapolis 500 was an established event by this time. Knute Rockne was coaching at Notre Dame. The first Old Oaken Bucket Game was held between IU and Purdue in 1925, and professional baseball was focused on a guy by the name of Babe Ruth. Of course, Indiana basketball reigned supreme. The emergence of the state high school basketball tournament as a Hoosier passion owes its roots to the rapid fan following that came about in the 1920s and 30s. During this time period, some school gymnasiums held more people than lived in the town. By the 1920s, more than 700 teams competed in the state tournament, each striving to be Indiana's one state champion.

The Jazz Age was indeed a decade of great change for America. Prohibition came and went. Women gained the right to vote and liberated themselves through their dress and manners. Though there were dark spots, including segregation, the KKK and the Great Depression, the prosperous 1920s also introduced red-hot jazz, sporting legends and the heyday of the Indiana-made automobile. The culture clash between those who hearkened back to yesteryear and those who wanted to leap forward to the modern era was bound to happen, especially during the extreme highs of the 1920s and the extreme lows of the 1930s. The Jazz Age also tempered a generation for the time to come. Frequently, called the "interwar years," this time period roared to life at the end of the first World War, but faded away at the dawn of World War II. For Americans and Hoosiers, the Jazz Age was not only a testing ground for change in social thought and lifestyle, but also the advent of wondrous new inventions, which made life faster, easier and far more interesting.

Additional Resources

Madison, James. *Indiana Through Tradition and Change.* Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1982.
Pick, Margaret Moos. *"Speakeasies, Flappers, and Red Hot Jazz: Music of the Prohibition."* Riverwalk Live from the Landing, 06/12/03. www.riverwalk.org/proglist/showpromo/prohibition.htm
Sann, Paul. *"The Lawless Decade: A Pictorial History of a Great American Transition."* www.paulsann.org/thelawlessdecade/index-2.htm
Image is "Farewell" by Geroges Barbier